

FWP COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Agenda Item: Delay May 15th Opening Date of Sun River WMA for up to two weeks

Meeting Date: May 5, 2011

Division: Wildlife (Region 4)

Action Needed: X **Approval of Final Rule/Action**

Time Needed: 15 Minutes

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Background (Brief description of the issue, decision to be made, history, etc.):

The Standard Sun River WMA noon opener brings hundreds of recreational users to the SRWMA for elk antler collection. The SRWMA in 2011 wintered approximately 2,800 elk. Historically elk migration from the WMA to the back country starts in early to mid-April and would be 95% complete by May 15th.

Heavy accumulations of snow during winter (2010-2011) along normal migration routes has kept elk from moving from the SRWMA as of May 1, 2011. Predicted weather patterns will not result in adequate snow melt to open migration corridors prior to the scheduled May 15, 2011 opener. Therefore, high numbers of elk will remain on the SRWMA. Minor conflicts between elk and humans in previous years have resulted in public concern and significant commission discussion over options and management of this and other WMAs statewide.

Normally, by late May (15 – 30), weather patterns, (temperatures, rain, and wind) can reduce snow pack in a matter of a week. By waiting until May 22, 2011, R-4 Biologists and staff believe that a reduction in the snow pack and the strong drive to return to the back country by elk will result in the elk migration off the SRWMA and into the back country. This will reduce elk numbers on the WMA to an acceptable level and minimizing the risk of human – elk conflict.

Public Involvement Process & Results: Upon the realization that elk movement was blocked and there is a high probability that a large numbers of elk (1,000+) will still be present on the SRWMA on May 15th, R-4 FWP informed the R-4 CAC and ask for input. Their recommendation was sent to the Commissioners (in a letter from Karl Gies) proposing at least one week delay (until May 22, 2011) in the opener and recommended an assessment of elk number before opening to public. If elk number are still high another week delay until May 29, 2011 should be considered.

On May 4th, 2011 the Sun River Working Group will be briefed and will make their recommendation to the Commissioners before the May 5th commission conference call.

Alternatives and Analysis (Brief description of alternative solutions with analysis of the pros and cons of each):

- Maintain the May 15, 2011 opener (no delay/change). High probability of human-wildlife conflict resulting in significant stress to elk and public outcry to FWP and the commission. Also potential to shift significant numbers of elk onto adjoining private property. As this has been a traditional opening date, there will be some angry horn hunters, and potential law enforcement actions.
- Delay opening date to May 22, 2011. Moderate to high probability that elk will move off the WMA onto public lands, and R-4 staff will have one additional week to assist/pressure elk to move off WMA prior to public entry.
- Delay opening date up to 2 weeks until May 29, 2011. If conditions improve significantly before then, as determined by FWP, allow an earlier opener.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: FWP recommends the Commission approve delaying the opening date of the Sun River Wildlife Management Area from May 15, 2011 at noon to May 29, 2011 at noon, unless conditions warrant opening the WMA sooner. FWP also recommends the commission delegate authority to the Director, with concurrence of the District 3 Commissioner (Moody), to open the WMA sooner, on May 22, 2011 at noon if sufficient elk movement off the WMA has occurred by then to minimize potential human-wildlife conflict. FWP will provide timely advertising of any change from May 29 to May 22. Both dates keep a weekend opening as the original May 15, 2011 was.

Proposed Motion (Draft language the Commission could use to adopt the agency recommendation):

I move the Commission approve a delay in the opening date of the Sun River WMA from May 15, 2011 to May 29, 2011, and delegate authority to the Director and the District 3 Commissioner (Moody) to reduce the delay until May 22, 2011 if FWP determines that elk numbers on the SRWMA are sufficiently reduced to minimize human/elk interaction and conflict.